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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM GG

SUBJECT: OKRUASHVILI THROWS DOWN THE GAUNTLET

REF: TBILISI 1370

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On September 25, former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili made the long-awaited announcement on the establishment of his political party - Movement for United Georgia. In his announcement and a subsequent television interview, Okruashvili for the first time harshly attacked President Saakashvili, accusing him of ordering political assassinations, personal corruption, "cowardice" in missing opportunities to retake the separatist regions, and other sensational crimes. End Summary.

Five Directions of Okruashvili's Attack

¶2. (U) In his most dramatic accusation, Okruashvili claimed that, when he was in the government, on many occasions he received personal instructions from the President to "liquidate" prominent figures in the society. One such figure was allegedly businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili. Okruashvili claimed that instead of carrying out this instruction, he mentioned it to other individuals who were well-connected to the U.S. government, and that he believes U.S. intervention led Saakashvili to stop mentioning the idea. Okruashvili also raised the controversial carbon monoxide poisoning death of Prime Minister Zhvania in 2005, saying he had information to the effect that Zhvania's dead body was taken to the apartment, where it was later found.

¶3. (U) Okruashvili's second line of attack was corruption in Saakashvili's government. Okruashvili claimed that as the Interior Minister he had briefly detained Saakashvili's uncle, Temur Alasania, for taking a bribe, but had to release him due to the "insistent request" of the President. Okruashvili claimed that Saakashvili's family had accumulated billions of dollars, stressing in particular that Saakashvili's cousin, Nick Alasania, was involved in the import of arms from Israel.

¶4. (U) The third direction was Saakashvili's alleged hatred and fear of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which Okruashvili said the President viewed as his "competitor" overshadowing his glory. Okruashvili accused Saakashvili of attempting to collect compromising information on church leaders in order to undermine their authority.

¶5. (U) The fourth direction was aimed at social and economic hardships, as Okruashvili questioned the necessity of building posh hotels like the Hyatt, when an "ordinary man from Kutaisi" had no means of staying in it, or of constructing new highways when ordinary people could travel on them "only in trucks loaded with vegetables."

¶6. (U) The fifth direction, which may well become

Okruashvili's strongest campaign theme, was on Georgia's unresolved conflicts and lost territories. Okruashvili stressed that in his period as Defense Minister, Georgia was only "one step away" from regaining South Ossetia, but because of the "cowardice and indecisiveness" of Saakashvili, Georgia lost this unique chance. As Okruashvili described it, the army was waiting for the order to carry out a small but effective operation, but a fearful Saakashvili failed to make this "political and historic decision." Okruashvili said Saakashvili also failed to make up his mind to denounce existing agreements on Peacekeeping Forces (PKFs), which "legitimize the presence of Russian peacekeepers today." According to Okruashvili, the only result attained so far by Saakashvili's efforts is the "caricature figure" of Dimitriy Sanakoyev in South Ossetia, who is "a bluff and a fiction of Georgia's unification." Okruashvili concluded that under the current leadership, which "moved in zigzags and was unable to demonstrate a principled position either to the international community or to Russia," Georgia was losing its chance to regain Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Okruashvili Appeals to the Public, Opposition

¶7. (U) In conclusion, Okruashvili appealed to the opposition to forget old differences and start a new cooperation "from a clean page." Okruashvili also called on the Georgian public to join him in his "campaign against fear." "Join us if you believe that the country is going in the wrong direction, join us if you believe that Georgia is in the first place, do not be afraid of Merabishvilis, Adeishvilis, Bokerias and the like, do not be afraid of Saakashvili," concluded Okruashvili.

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Reaction is Both Sensationalist and Tempered

¶8. (SBU) Okruashvili's comments created a sensation among the public, media and experts, though the initial reaction of politicians, both of the majority and opposition, was relatively low-key. Most opposition leaders refrained from embracing Okruashvili. Ruling party representatives did not go very far beyond characterizing Okruashvili's statements as "laughable, staid, or degrading." Majority MP Giga Bokeria said Okruashvili's statements sounded like those made by Shalva Natelashvili, Igor Giorgadze, Jondi Baghaturia, or some "other mixture of pro-Russian politicians." Bokeria's comment implied that as the government started a crackdown on corruption among his associates, Okruashvili made a preemptive step to secure his political immunity. President Saakashvili himself, currently at the UN General Assembly in New York, has not yet commented on Okruashvili or his statements.

Comment

¶9. (C) Okruashvili's emergence in opposition had long been expected (reftel) but the scope and visceral nature of his attacks on Saakashvili shocked even long-time observers of Georgia's hyperbole-saturated politics. While we cannot comment on the truth of all of Okruashvili's charges -- we have no knowledge of any plan to kill Patarkatsishvili, for example -- we know for sure that some are false: USG participation in the Zhvania investigation made clear his body was not moved. Okruashvili's claim that Saakashvili refused to order the military to retake South Ossetia is particularly significant and represents Okruashvili's attempt to outflank Saakashvili on the right on the emotional issue of Georgia's territorial integrity. We strongly believe Saakashvili is right that there can be no military solution to the conflicts, but Okruashvili is likely to continue to

hammer away at this theme.
TEFFT